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ABSTRACT

In this address to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, the Executive Director of the National Education Association (NEA) outlines the Association's objections to standardized tests. First, the interpretations of tests are usually based on several fallacious assumptions about education. For example, to say that a skill can be tested implies that it can be explicitly defined and measured with simple means. Measuring the status of simple skills is a very complex process-entirely too complex for the most involved standardized test to measure. The second objection is that standardized tests forster big brotherism. The universal imposition of the test nearly mandates that the test's assumptions become the learning objective for each child no matter how inadequate or impossible they might be. They intimidate students and coerce teachers. Thirdly, standardized testing encourages conformity at the expense of creativity. In a system geared to the norm, the only child to benefit is the absolutely average child. NEA's fourth objection to standardized tests is simply that they do not do what they claim to do--improve allocation of resources to needs, help parents evaluate schools and evaluate teacher performance. Standardized tests accomplish none of these purposes; they are even counter-productive to several. (RC)

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San Francisco, California
December 19, 1975

STANDARDIZED TESTS: ARE THEY WORTH THE COSTS?

The National Education Association has almost two million members. We are the largest professional association in the world. Our members teach in nursery schools, elementary schools, secondary schools, community colleges and universities. And so I am here to talk about America's schools, her teachers and their work.

But although speaking on behalf of others, I want to talk to you also out of my personal experience as a teacher and, perhaps even more, out of my great concern as a parent and taxpayer, over what's happening to our nation's classrooms.

In Washington, where NEA has its headquarters, many people pride themselves in their ability to maintain a unique perspective on public opinion as it takes shape around the country. Usually it takes the form of discovering the obvious but, plainly, one of the most important of the national trends we see today is a kind of compulsive dissatisfaction with tax-supported services. And, at the risk of appearing self serving, I think it important to state at the outset that in my opinion any public dissatisfaction with the schools is but part of this larger, general, and growing discontent. The public mood of fear, cynicism, and frustration is such that, in the absence of a unifying national leadership, moves many to lash out indiscriminately, taking insufficient care to identify the enemy. For some time now the Harris polls have been reporting a loss of confidence in business and government -- and to only slightly less degree in virtually every other institution of authority. But poll after poll shows more public confidence in schools and teachers than in business unions, the Congress or the news media.

However, in this environment, it is perhaps no wonder that public employees have become an increasingly common target for the public's disaffection. "No more New Yorks" has become a civic rallying cry almost everywhere. Here in San Francisco -- which is usually thought of as a pro-union town -- there was, I gather, unprecedented negative reaction to the grievances of your striking police and firemen, enough to make municipal policy toward public-employee unions a hot issue in your mayor's race.

Meanwhile, public employees, who have special reasons of their own to be disaffected, have become increasingly militant. And that includes teachers, who at last count represented 20 percent of the total public employee force. One way or another, what you're seeing in California, where teachers have been going on strike with more and more alacrity, is happening all over the country.

I want to approach my subject today by talking briefly about one of these California problems--the one that recently ended in East Whittier. For East Whittier turns out to be a classical illustration that can help us clarify and understand a general situation. It has much to tell us about the public employee movement as a whole. It has perhaps even more to tell us about the real concerns of teachers.

What caused East Whittier's 300 teachers to confront their school board was not salary. It was not a dispute over fringe benefits or overtime. It was not a problem of working conditions.

The issue was a standardized test.

Now, since during this next several minutes I expect to have a lot to say about the value of testing, let me explain that by "standardized tests" I mean such things as college board tests, achievement tests given to elementary and secondary school children, graduate record exams, and the so-called IQ tests. In short, a standardized test is any test that compares performance to predetermined norms and is administered in identical form to large numbers of students.

In East Whittier, it was a district achievement test that the teachers objected to. In their experience, the test was too rigid. it had never been validated against another test, it did not tell them what specific questions their pupils missed, and it did not give them any real help in evaluating a child's progress. Moreover, the test was routinely given not at a time convenient to the pupils but at the convenience of a shared-time computer. Not long before, the test had been given during a record heat wave, simply because the computer was ready even though the children were not.

The teachers in East Whittier didn't want to give the test anymore. When the school board refused to negotiate the issue in good faith, they struck.

The board responded by instituting dismissal proceedings against all 300. Subsequently, the dismissal proceedings were withdrawn and the board agreed to negotiate.

Thus, for the first time anywhere, standardized testing became the central issue in a confrontation between the organized profession and school management.

Why?

What does it mean that feelings could suddenly run so deep over a fixture of public-school life that most Americans have long taken for granted? Let's look first at the situational component.

The answer lies partly in the emergence of a new dynamic in the American workplace -- the professional union. And it lies partly in the fact that standardized testing has come to constitute a serious threat to the teacher's ability to perform as a professional in the classroom.

The fastest growing unions in America today are the public -employee unions -- associations of fire fighters, police, doctors, nurses, social workers, government clerks, and, of course, teachers. Of the 14 million public workers in America, over 5 million are now unionized, and the number grows at the rate of 2,000 a week. But it is not their numbers alone that make public workers a new force in American life. Even more, it is that they behave quite differently from the traditional industrial trade unions with which most of us are familiar. True, by and large professional unions and industrial unions use the same methods of protest, share many of the same objectives, and use the same bargaining techniques. But the difference is real, and it's particularly important that public management understand it. More than their counterparts in private, commercial, production enterprises our members face their consumers or clients daily and directly. Since we personally take the rap for failure we crave quality service and success. We demand the optimal opportunity to succeed. Professional unions carry these concerns for quality to the bargaining table and traditional trade unions never have. In the industrial model, product quality is properly management's responsibility, not the union's. Professional employees, on the contrary, not only care about the product -- they are willing, if need be, to strike for the right to succeed.

And this, believe me, is what is at the heart of teacher unrest in this country. Our membership surveys say that the number-one issue for teachers is not salary but class size, and the reason teachers are most concerned about class size is that their own experience leads them to believe passionately that it is the ratio of teacher to pupil that has most to do with the quality of education. We recently polled our membership, asking them to identify the most important changes they'd like to make on their jobs. Lower class size was at the top of the list, followed by better curriculum, better administration, then higher salary.

Regarding the substantive answer to East Whittier, it is precisely this concern for quality that made testing the issue. And it is this same concern that has caused the NEA to call for a moratorium on standardized testing in general. We are convinced that as most frequently used standardized tests are at best wasteful and at worst destructive. They do not serve teachers. They do not serve students. They do not serve parents. Whether I view these tests as a teacher, or as a parent, or as a bargaining agent for teachers -- regardless of the hat my head is under, I come out at the same place. Standardized testing must go. It is so mischievious a practice that it should be abolished unless there is a specific purpose and it has been determined that the test in question fulfills the purpose.

Why do I say so? For the following reasons:

First, the interpretation of tests are usually based on several fallacious assumptions about education. For example, to say that a skill can be tested implies that it can be explicitly defined and measured with simple means. "Surely,"

people say, "it's not that complex. It should be easy to find out whether a student can read or not."

Easy? If a five-year-old knows the alphabet and a dozen words, can she read? If a 16-year-old can fill out a driver's license application but still sounds out each word in a second-grade reader, can he read?

In Michigan, after extensive review, the state board of education finally managed to define reading in the broadest sense. To do this required articulation of 23 separate factors, or objectives. To describe math skills they needed 45 separate objectives.

Now imagine testing almost half the grades in an entire state school system -- which is the amount of testing recommended by Michigan's test makers -- on all the behaviors school teachers are expected to develop. Administering the tests would be time-consuming enough, not to mention the time required to compile the results and evaluate the data. Our conclusion: measuring the status of simple skills is a very complex process -- entirely too complex for the most involved standardized test to measure.

Another fallacy implicit in standardized testing is that people agree on the goals of education. This just isn't the case. For some parents the goal is job preparation. For some it is acceptance by a college. For some it is simply custodial care. For still others it is social adjustment or family appreciation. For the handicapped it may be coping but for the prodigy, creative writing. Since there is in fact no agreement on goals, how can there possibly be a measurement of their attainment? Nevertheless, standardized tests take it for granted that everybody places equal value on whatever skill is being tested.

Our second objection to standardized testing is that it fosters big brotherism. No teacher can freely send a child to the frustration and anxiety of failure. Accordingly, the universal impositon of the test nearly mandates that the test's assumptions become the learning objective for each child no matter how inadequate -- or even worse -- how impossible they might be. Such intimidation of students and coercion of teachers in the exercise of their professional judgment is wrong. Further, it works against student-parent-teacher decision making and relegates them all to second, third and fourth places behind the now-dominant test maker.

Third, we object to standardized testing because it encourages conformity at the expense of creativity. In a system geared to the norm, the only child to benefit is the absolutely average child, one who does not deviate in any way from the test makers assumptions. Bright kids receive less attention from the teacher than the less bright. Why knock yourself out with the ones who already know the answers if your job hangs on getting the slow ones over a test? Artistic children suffer, too, because the teacher must concentrate on the tested skills if he wants to appear successful. In effect, the test makers are saying that creativity isn't important because it can't be tested.

Only the child with no positive or negative deviations from the assumptions of the test maker probably does all right. The question is, by what right -- under whose authority -- do test buyers impose the test maker's definition of an

absolutely normal child? Do we really want to see our daughters and sons -- each a little special -- pressed into compliance with a common denominator. Those of you who have children who participate in standardized testing programs -- consider the implications. Do you realize that it is the impersonal test that dictates what your child must learn? That the test obligates a teacher to concentrate on certain subjects at the risk of her job? That tests written in New Jersey may predetermine the behavior of your child's teacher? It's worth thinking about.

NEA's fourth objection to standardized tests is simply that they do not do what they are claimed to do. When advocates of standardized testing attempt to justify their use they commonly cite three main values.

1. The tests can improve the allocation of resources to needs.

2. They provide data to help parents evaluate their schools and make decisions about educational needs.

3. Test results can be used to evaluate the teacher's performance.

In fact, standardized tests accomplish none of these purposes; they are even counter-productive to several.

Let's look at whether or not the tests can be used to allocate resources. Test makers and test purchasers assume that aggregate test scores -- scores for an entire school or an entire school district -- point up major performance problems that are correctible through the judicious application of money.

Some theorists say that additional funds will improve performance. But if additional funds are granted to a non-achieving school to correct performance problems, isn't this punishing the achieving school, which receives no additional funds? Another theory is that the withholding of funds can be used as a goad to improve poor performance. Thus, poorly performing schools have funds cut back while highly performing schools get more.

Now, the obvious error in this philosophy is that it punishes the child. If you can't buy your kid a good hamburger for a dollar, do you insist on buying him one for 50 cents? You end up with a lousy hamburger or a hungry kid. Children are not expendable. Even in the face of apparent failure the educational effort must go on.

Let's look at the second justification, that tests provide helpful evaluative data to parents.

This was one of the main reasons for the statewide testing system we had in Michigan, my home state. All students in selected grades were tested statewide and, after all the data had been aggregated, scores and mean percentiles for each school system were published. Armed with these data citizens were expected to calmly and quietly decide which school systems were performing.

What do you suppose happened? Calm and considered decision making? Or pure panic among parents who saw that the school their child attended wasn't at the top of the list?

My own wife was deceived and concerned. "Maybe we ought to put our kids in a different school system," she said. But in reality there wasn't any significant difference between the quality of the systems. Like all rankings, this one had a top and a bottom, but when you looked at the raw scores, the difference was minimal. The average student score in the poorest was separated from the best by only a few points. The only thing the scores really showed was that Lansing, where we lived, had more poor and linguistically different kids in its school system. This was no secret to anyone. It's plain to see that incomplete data hinder citizen decision making, rather than aiding it.

Last, the third claim: Tests can be used to evaluate teacher performance. In the fad of the day it's called accountability. First, it is important to note that this style of accountability has its origins in production management, not social institutions. It was popularized if not introduced, in government by Robert McNamara as part of the "management-by-objectives" concept. The central idea of accountability, which had a profound effect on the thinking of Richard Nixon, is that of funding incentives: when performance improves so will funding and when performance is down federal funds will dry up. The concept works well in an industrial/technical context, where input and product can be exactly measured. Its efficacy in a teaching situation is somewhat more doubtful.

As a nation we are becoming obsessed with technological thought patterns. Since our factory-line techniques have been successful beyond our wildest imagination in increasing goods production we have been increasingly -- and unfortunately -- tempted to force these techniques on disciplines for which they are inappropriate. This is what is happening with education and the so-called accountability movement.

This is not to say that NEA thinks teachers shouldn't be accountable. In fact, it is the concept of accountability to professional standards that led to formation of the NEA in the first place.

What we object to is accountability to standardized test results. We object to the tests themselves, as I have said. We object to an evaluation system designed to make tanks rather than mold minds. We object to being required to teach to the common performance level assumed by a test rather than to the maximum achievable through the individual capability of the child.

We agree entirely that the consumers of our education system have a right to expect a quality education. It is because we want a quality education that we don't want the consumer to be duped by worthless and destructive standardized tests. Teachers must be accountable, but to the student and the parent, not to the test maker.

All the faults I listed with respect to the standardized tests are also found in accountability systems based on such tests. An effective school accountability system must be sensitive to a host of uncontrolled variables in the school and non-school life of the student. There are many such variables: the physical quality of the classroom, the size of the class, ethnic diversity, previous pupil preparation, and amount of learning available -- or not available -- to the child in his home.

In reality, the teacher has no more control over the environment in which she or he functions than a Ford assembly-line foreman. Could the foreman turn out adequate cars if he was asked to make twice as many in a day as he knew his

assembly line could handle? Is he responsible for the product when he has no control over the raw materials? Does he have to make as good a car from poorly prepared materials as he can from well made parts? And, what if he has cars that refuse to be assembled, like some students who refuse to cooperate with the goals, objectives, and interests of test makers and school bureaucrats?

But kids, you say, are not at all like cars. They shouldn't be treated like cars. Right. More important -- a school should not be treated like a factory. Yet it's a factory concept that is being foisted on the teacher, the schools, and your children. If it is absurd to compare children to cars isn't it equally absurd to compare children to profits? Should young adults be pumped out of an education process, as similar to one another at the end as one dollar bill is to the next?

Of course not. Children go into the schools as individuals. It is the teacher's function to preserve that individualism and sustain that creativity while passing on the skills of an educated society to the child. Of all the fallacies of accountability the greatest is the assumption that children are so much alike that they can all be measured by the same test.

Tests, in NEA's judgment, are useful as a descriptor of the individual student's developmental status vis-a-vis the standards or norms built into the test. With skillful, enlightened, and individual interpretation, they can be of real value to the teacher, parent, and student in charting that individual student's future growth.

But this is not the way standardized tests are now being used. And at present the only real beneficiaries, aside from the test marketers themselves, are insecure school managers striving for comfort in their relations with school boards, legislators, and governors. To such managers, critical of the imprecise language that characterizes humanitarian values, diverse goals, interpersonal relationships, and creativity -- all of which, in turn, characterize a good school -- a standardized test can be a cozy comfort indeed.

But to those of us who resist the imposition of a sterile industrial model on what should be a liberating, exciting and individual experience, the standardized test is like a lock on the mind, a guard at the factory gate. Beyond the affirmative harm done by these instances, consideration should be given to the lost opportunity resulting from the expense of the testing programs themselves. Standardized testing is an industry owned and operated for a profit by several major publishers which include McGraw-Hill, IBM and Harcourt-Brace. An average test costs $2 and over 17 million students are tested each year. That's a $35 million business exclusive of personnel and facility cost. You'd better believe its profits, especially when you include the cost of the elaborate systems and materials that some producers are willing to sell as prescriptions for the maladies which their tests reveal.

Some of you may be familiar with Christopher Jencks' book, Inequality. In it, Jencks says:

> We ought to describe schools in a language appropriate to a family rather than to a factory. This implies that we will have to accept diverse standards for judging schools, just as we do for judging families.

As a teacher, parent, and professional union executive, I think it's time to get the children and their teachers out of the factory and back into the classroom where they belong and that we all energetically strive to preserve the distinction between the two.